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Understanding transitions using a sociocultural framework

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## **Understanding transitions using a sociocultural framework**

### **Abstract**

Transitions have traditionally been characterized as forms of change. These may either be inner changes (new beliefs or developmental growth) or the physical move from one place to another (see Erikson, 1975), such as the move from primary to secondary school. This theoretical paper will argue that transition can be best understood using a sociocultural framework, which links human thought and action to social and cultural situatedness (Zittoun, 2006). Using ideas underpinned by Vygotsky (1978) we will present three frameworks for addressing sociocultural transitions (i) the notion of consequential transitions (Beach, 1995), (ii) symbolic transitions and identity rupture (Zittoun, 2006) and (iii) Communities of Practice transitions (Wenger, 1998). We will borrow examples from research on educational transitions from primary and secondary school contexts through to Higher Education in order to demonstrate that transitions are about a change in self-identity born out of uncertainty in the social and cultural worlds of the individual. Implications for educational practitioners involved in supporting young people undergoing transitions will be discussed.

## **Understanding transitions using a sociocultural framework**

Stability and changeability has been a consistent feature of study within psychology, particularly within the fields of educational and developmental psychology. This tradition has been led by significant figures such as James (1890) in relation to self, Erikson (1975) when discussing moments of crises and Piaget (1976) most notably conceptualizing disequilibrium. These perspectives allude to change being brought about or influenced by some external or social situation, which have the power to shift our understandings of ourselves. This paper argues that these changes, which we will call transitions, can be best understood by taking into account the social and cultural situatedness of human thought and action (Zittoun, 2006). In this vein, transitions encompass more than the move from one physical location (e.g. moving from one school to another) or a forward trajectory in age (e.g. developmental periods). Transitions are complex and multi-faceted and invariably involve changes to self-identity born out of uncertainty in the social and cultural worlds of the individual.

In this paper we argue that Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides a useful backdrop for looking at transitions across various practices (by practice we mean the things that people do), institutions and contexts. Sociocultural theory begins with the premise that children, in their development, reconstruct the cultural knowledge from the previous generations of communities they belong to (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, a child's development is neither a singular maturational process, nor does it exist without an historical basis (Hedegaard, Chaiklin & Jensen, 1999). We could use parents reading to their children at home as an example. Parents, whose own parents did not read to them as children, tend to find it hard to read with their children, even

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when they know it is something the school would really like them to do (see Gallimore & Goldenber, 2001). However, parents who have reading at home as part of their own history tend to recreate this practice with relative ease with their own children. Sociocultural theory addresses the socially organised activities that are undertaken as part of everyday routines (e.g. going to school), which are profoundly influenced by the history of communities and individuals. For sociocultural theorists, it is through participation and engagement in socially organised activities (like bedtime story reading) that psychological processes are developed. The emphasis is on the interaction between the individual and their mind and cultural, historical and institutional settings (see Daniels for more detail, 2008).

When we refer to transitions within a sociocultural framework we presuppose a negotiation between the individual and the social contexts they inhabit. We find this definition of transition useful because it enables us to consider how any transition could be a moment of change for an individual:

We understand the construct of ‘transition’ not as a moment of change but as the experience of changing, of living the discontinuities between the different contexts...the construct ‘transition’ is, in our understanding, a plural one. Transitions arise from the individual’s need to live, cope and participate in different contexts, to face different challenges, to take profit from the advantages of the new situation arising from the changes. Transitions include the process of adapting to new social and cultural experiences (Gorgorió , Planas & Vilella, 2002, p. 24)

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Hviid & Zittoun (2008) describe how the study of transitions has largely taken two forms: (i) looking at the outcomes of the transition process (e.g. measuring the well-being of children before and after the move from primary to secondary school, and (ii) examining the *process* of transition – in other words, transition as a catalyst for change or rupture. There are many studies looking at the first form of transitions (outcomes) and less looking at the second form (process), the latter of which is something we attempt to theorise about here.

To explicate this further we will now look at some of the theoretical discussions about transitions within the sociocultural arena. We turn first to the idea that transitions, whilst always linking the individual and sociocultural structures, take different forms and have some impact or consequence on the individual and the world around them.

### **Transitions as consequential**

Beach (1999) was interested in how knowledge is transferred from one situation or setting to another. For example, does a mathematical strategy learnt by the child in school make the transition to other settings like the home? Does the student going from school to university carry over essay skills? Perhaps more importantly, does the process of transition alter, sometimes by necessity, the individual and the social activities in which they engage?

Transitions, argues Beach (1999), are consequential in that they have an impact on the individual and the social context they inhabit. In this way, a consequential transition “is the conscious reflective struggle to reconstruct knowledge, skills, and identity in

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ways that are consequential to the individual becoming someone or something new,” (p. 30). Using a sociocultural framework to underpin his ideas Beach has developed a typology for understanding different forms of consequential transition:

- Lateral transitions – occur when an individual moves between two historically related activities in a single direction, such as moving from primary school to secondary school, or from school to work. Participation in one activity is replaced by participation in another activity – often involving an element of developmental progression from the previous activity or context
- Collateral transitions – involve individuals’ relatively simultaneous participation in two or more historically related activities e.g. the move between home and school; moving between different subject classes at school; adults attending educational classes to help them acquire additional skills required in their job
- Encompassing transitions – occur within the boundaries of a social activity that is itself changing, and is often where an individual is adapting to existing or changing circumstances in order to continue participation in the activity e.g. teachers undertaking new education reform. This form of transition often involves a generational change where younger participants assist older participants in learning new ways of working (e.g. acquiring advanced computer skills as technology continues to progress)
- Mediatlional transitions – occur within education activities that project or simulate involvement in an activity yet to be fully experienced e.g. certain forms of vocational education; children playing shops at school or learning how to write out a cheque before being old enough to have a cheque book.

Each of these transitions has the potential to engender some kind of change in the individual through the personal reflection and sense making that takes place. The change may be in the form of knowledge construction; the adaptation of old skills or the incorporation of new ones; change in identities; and/or change in social position. Beach (1999) in fact argues that transitions are not just about knowledge transfer but about reconstructing what you do. Such transitions are consequential in that they involve a process of development and are associated with personal progress.

When we turn to the empirical research exploring different forms of transition, we can see examples of reported experiences, which can be interpreted within Beach's notion of a consequential transition. In primary education, for example, there has been much work on how to effectively prepare pupils for the transition to secondary school. Strategies such as 'move up days' where Year 6 (ages 10/11 years) children get to spend a day at their future secondary school, and visits from their future secondary school teachers to their current school have been reported to be helpful for children (Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). These approaches draw on Beach's mediational transition in that they enable children to get a 'taster' of what the real experience will be like. Facilitating the transition between education and work through the use of work experience also draws on Beach's conception of mediational transition (e.g. see Guile & Griffiths, 2001).

In post-compulsory education, the lateral transition which occurs when students move from school to university has been researched extensively. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that students' prior experiences of learning are used to form expectations



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about and comparisons with university study. For example, in Krause's (2001) study of students tackling their first written assignment, they frequently spoke about the differences between their experiences at school and university. Similarly, students used their previous educational experiences when forming expectations about and reflecting on their experience of higher education (Leese, 2010; Shanahan, 2000). Therefore, the transition from one learning environment to another involved students reflecting on their experience of prior contexts, and reconstructing it to adapt to the new context.

Collateral transitions, suggestive of the simultaneous move between more than one activity, can be said to characterize the sociocultural-based research on home-school relationships. In a study looking at home and school mathematics, Crafter and Abreu (2010) explored the conflicts that can arise when the ways of doing mathematics at home is taught very differently to those at school. The conflict for the child is that they must constantly negotiate these differences if they wish to please both the teacher and a highly respected parent. There are examples in the empirical literature where collateral transition between home and school create conflicts in values. In a study based in Denmark, Hedegaard (2005) found that the values held by Turkish immigrant parents sometimes conflicted with the host Danish schools, which left pupils to negotiate between the two settings.

### **Transitions, rupture and identity change**

We have argued that when using sociocultural theorising to understand transition, the notion that transition can facilitate a process of reconstruction or change in the

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individual is developed. In other words, not only can transitions be a struggle, but they also have the potential to alter “one’s sense of self” (Beach, 1999, p. 114). In support of this proposition, research studying students’ adjustment to university study has highlighted that the changes and challenges they negotiate during their transition leads to personal transformation, and a new sense of identity (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Maunder, Gingham & Rogers, 2010; Warin & Dempster, 2007). Similarly, in school-based research, Lucey & Reay (2000) talk about ‘identities in transition’ and how children negotiate their sense of self through the process of moving from primary to secondary school. In addition, indicators of what ‘successful transition’ from primary to secondary school involves has included references to change in children’s sense of self through improved confidence and self-esteem (Evangelou et al, 2008).

Zittoun takes this idea of reconstruction and change a bit further by looking at the social and cognitive resources available to us during these transitional processes. Cognitive resources might be the technical, practical and formal kinds of knowledge which people draw on to make sense of a new situation, and refers to skills that help the individual think and behave in new ways (Zittoun, 2004). Equally, people gain social knowledge through experience (Zittoun, 2006). The use of social resources in transition might be said to address the redefinitions of identities and changes in cognitive resources. For example, pupils frequently reinterpret and readjust their sense of self (or self-image as the authors describe it) during encounters with peers and teachers (Galton & Morrison, 2000). Shanahan (2007) talks about education being a ‘catalyst for change’, with mature students choosing to return to study as a way of making changes to their lives and themselves.

The uncertainty that sometimes arises from change has been referred to as a rupture (Zittoun, 2006). Ruptures would not refer to everyday changes which go unnoticed, rather they are moments which engender uncertainty or disquiet. There are three possible types of rupture

- Change in cultural context (e.g. a war, natural disaster, the introduction of a new technology which changes lives). Sometimes the rupture can precipitate the transition experience and this may particularly apply to changes in cultural context. For example, in a study of adolescents who had immigrated to the United States, the change in cultural context for one adolescent came about because of the violent death of a parent (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).
- Change to a person's 'sphere of experience' (e.g. move from one country to another, moving school, moving house). At other moments the transition itself creates the uncertain experience, such as the changes to a person's immediate environment. The move from Portugal to England was said to challenge the linguistic and cultural resources of pupils which were experienced in intense emotional ways (Hale & Abreu, 2010).
- Change in relationships or interactions (e.g. a new teacher, a friend leaves the school) (Zittoun, 2006, p. 5). Encountering and getting to know new people involves a reorientation of identity based on how the self is reflected through interactions with others. Research has shown that it is common for students to engage in a form of social comparison when adjusting to a new environment, comparing themselves to other learners and using this to evaluate whether or

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not they ‘fit in’ (Holdsworth, 2006; Maunder et al, 2010). Also, friends at university have been found to contribute to students reporting increased confidence and security about their own self-image (Brooks, 2007).

### **Transitions within Communities of Practice**

A third analytical framework which is useful for understanding educational transitions is Communities of Practice by Wenger (1998). This framework is helpful because it places the learner at centre stage whilst recognizing the role of communities (where we belong), practices (what we do), meanings (how we make sense of what we do) and identities (how belonging affects who we are).

Wenger (1998) presents ‘Communities of Practice’ as a social theory of learning where social participation in a community is central for learning to take place.

Through interacting with members of an existing knowledge community and learning their shared practices, the learner develops an identity as a competent member which fosters their sense of belonging. The participation process therefore “shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4).

Everyone belongs to several communities of practice (such as family, school, workplace, profession, hobbies), and the communities we are part of change over time. A community of practice is comprised of members who have shared habits, practices, rituals, values and routines. Such communities are rarely formal in terms of organised membership, but they are constituted by the pursuit of shared interests,

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knowledges and/or common goals (Wenger, 1998). Within a primary school community, for example, there are common rituals such as the structure of the school day, organisation of classrooms, subjects taught, rules and language used. There are also shared practices in relation to expected behaviour and responsibilities. Teachers assume a specific role in the classroom, and pupils are expected to interact with them in a particular manner. Behaviours such as children sitting with their legs crossed and arms folded, and putting their hand up to answer a question are further examples of community norms which individuals learn as they engage with the community.

Within the primary school 'community of practice', there are other smaller communities where individuals interact. For example, discipline areas have their own rituals and practices (such as subject specific terminology, discourse, knowledge, techniques and conventions) to which teachers are the relative experts. Children, as novice members, are 'apprentices' in the community with teachers serving as facilitators to their growing membership by teaching them disciplinary knowledge and skills and encouraging active social participation (by reading the books, 'using' and practicing the knowledge and skills) (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Transition in a 'Community of Practice' framework therefore refers to the process of joining and becoming members a new community of practice. Whilst Zittoun's and Beach's conceptualisations of transition both emphasise the role of identity shifts, with the individual changing or 'becoming' a different self, they put less prominence on the adjustments occurring in others as a result of this. In 'Communities of Practice', transition not only happens to the individual through acquiring new skills, knowledge, meanings and identities, but also in the community itself by the inclusion of new members, refinement of practices and continuum of expertise. In this way,

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transition is seen as a two-way process. Something that Wenger addresses with less depth within the framework are moments when we don't become a competent member of a community of practice (such as children who disengage from the school learning) or those who dis-identify with a community (see Hodges, 1998).

The Communities of Practice framework has been applied to various different types of educational transition, such as children starting school (Dockett & Perry, 2005); mature students starting university (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007); professional students moving towards expert ways of knowing using problem-based learning (Zimmitat, 2007); doctoral students becoming members of the academic community (Hasrati, 2005) and teachers undertaking professional learning (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). There are also findings from empirical research on different types of educational transition that allow us to draw on Communities of Practice as an interpretive framework. For example, Leese's (2010) study of undergraduate students starting university found that some of the challenges they experienced were centred on 'not knowing how things worked'. This included being unfamiliar with university language (such as 'enrolment'), getting used to the format of lectures, and feeling that they didn't have appropriate technological skills. If we view higher education as a 'Community of Practice', each of these examples can be understood as students being unfamiliar with, hence peripheral to, the community in the early days. The process of learning about common practices and actively participating in the university community will enable students to become fuller members and assume the identity of a 'university student', and later, a 'university graduate' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Similar issues are highlighted in the transfer from primary to secondary school, where

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children ‘getting to know the routines’ of the school was noted as important in successful transition (Evangelou et al, 2008).

We have also found it useful to draw on Wenger’s focus on relationality between community members, to find examples of how social relationships can be used to facilitate and support educational transitions. A study of children starting school highlighted that peer relationships served important purposes for transition (Peters, 2003). Not only did friendships with others provide companionship and a sense of belonging to the school community, but they also supplied learning support in the classroom through collaborative partnerships and modelling expected behaviour. ‘Buddy’ and peer mentoring systems have also been highlighted as factors which contribute to successful transition between primary and secondary school (Evangelou et al, 2008). In both of these examples, other pupils as more experienced community members provide cues and guidance to help new pupils get to grips with school practices – thus facilitating their community membership through a form of apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

### **Reflections on sociocultural transitions**

Although each of the frameworks discussed present a different take on transition, there are important commonalities running across them which reflect their sociocultural underpinnings. One commonality is the broad conceptualisation of transition, and the many forms it can take. There is a tendency in some educational literature for discussions of transition to centre on the physical move between educational contexts (such as starting school; moving from primary to secondary

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school, and starting university). Whilst these are undoubtedly momentous examples of change and their significance for the young people experiencing them should not be underestimated, the sociocultural frameworks outlined in this paper present a more complex picture of what transition means. Taking Beach's ideas as an example, there are subtleties in the transition process taking place as individuals are learning and encountering new knowledge, and moving between contexts on a regular basis (e.g. new cognitive resources like negotiating mathematical strategies between home and school or acquiring a new language).

Secondly, all of the frameworks discussed include a focus on relationships between people in their particular context or situation as a crucial aspect of transition. As such, transition is not seen to be an isolated venture - it involves social interaction and active participation with other members. Social resources come into play when relationships with others, like forging new friendships on entering university, have the power to reconstruct identities. Social and cognitive resources are interlinked so that the adolescent who makes a major transition (e.g. to university) is aided through this process by a particular novel or the lyrics to a song (see Zittoun, 2006 for more examples).

Finally, a core feature of each framework is the recognition of the 'self' in the transition process. Undergoing transition, according to these perspectives, is a personal project involving reflection and identity construction, with the individual "becoming someone or something new" (Beach, 1999, p. 102).



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Therefore, if we are to adopt a sociocultural framework for understanding educational transition, it requires us to move beyond merely focusing on the functional changes that are taking place (i.e. the outcomes) when a pupil or student is moving into a new educational environment or learning situation, to also taking into account some of the inner shifts that individuals are experiencing (i.e. the process). The uncertainty and ‘newness’ associated with change will involve a search for meaning and a reconstruction of sense of self. As a result, individuals undergoing transitions of various forms will emerge with a reformed identity.

### **Implications**

When we consider what adopting this sociocultural position might mean for practitioners supporting educational transitions, there are several implications.

- The importance of the social.

Social resources, such as positive peer relationships, seem to be crucial for facilitating transition (Pratt & George, 2005) because other people can provide social knowledge about ways of behaving or ways of being. For example, friendships offer support to individuals undergoing the uncertainty and confusion associated with transition (Demetriou, Goalen, & Rudduck, 2000; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), and also help instil a sense of belonging to the new community (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000). Practitioners should therefore prioritise the development of relationships for learners undertaking educational transition by providing lots of opportunity for social networking; organising collaborative activities; and helping to nurture relationships between new and existing members of

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the learning community (either through informal or more formal means such as mentoring/buddying).

- The role of prior experience

Individuals bring their own cultural worlds with them and use their previous sociocultural experiences, such as cognitive resources (e.g. learning approaches; essay skills), to form templates for encountering new situations. As a result, the needs, difficulties, and support requirements each learner has in transition will vary. This has implications for transition programmes, because generic 'one size fits all' approaches may not address individual requirements. Propositions that education would benefit from adopting more personalised, flexible, comprehensive, multi-faceted and prolonged approaches to transition support which accommodate individual variability has already been broached in the literature (e.g. Barefoot, 2008; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson et al, 2000) .

- Process rather than product.

The transition journey is just as important for the individual as the outcome. Despite the uncertainty, unfamiliarity and feelings of discomfort associated with change, learning to navigate this process is personally constructive and identity shaping. The process of adjustment involves valuable identity work which learners need to be given adequate opportunities to experience. This means that attempts to prepare or assist learners with transition in a directive manner, and in ways which aim to achieve the end goal in a short time and with minimal challenges, may not be a fruitful use of educators' time. For example, adult students starting university reported preferring to find their own way rather than be 'taught' the particular skills that they needed

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(O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Learners need to be given the chance to actively participate in their transition experience, and make their own meaning from the hurdles they encounter and overcome. The focus should be on helping the person negotiate their own way through the change – ensuring that they remain central to the sense making and reconstruction of knowledge that is needed in order for them to make a successful transition.

In conclusion, we have argued that transitions can be usefully understood from a sociocultural perspective which situates the individual in a wider social and cultural context. By presenting 3 frameworks, each with common threads but slightly different emphasis, we suggest that transitions are complex and multifaceted, involving a search for meaning and shifts in personal identity. By focusing on the process of transition, not just the outcome, the interaction between cognitive and social resources needed in transition can be examined. We have also argued that transition is not limited to the individuals undertaking the changes, and highlighted the importance of relationships with others in the process. As a result, we have suggested some implications for practice centring on the need for a personal, flexible approach to supporting transition which recognise the significance of the experience for the individual, and for the others involved.

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